

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 December 1985

China-USSR: Maneuvering In The Triangle [redacted]

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Summary

Over the past year Beijing has unilaterally moved to establish a broader framework for normalizing relations with Moscow that could open the way for an expanded political dialogue and resumption of party-to-party contacts. These steps reflect China's increased confidence in its ability to maneuver within the Sino-US-USSR strategic triangle--a confidence stemming in part from steady improvements in Sino-US relations, its reading of the US-USSR strategic balance, and Soviet signals of interest in improving relations. [redacted]

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Although Beijing probably does not expect any significant change soon in Soviet policy on the security issues that divide them, it may be preparing to make a greater effort to probe the limits of Moscow's flexibility. The Chinese probably have concluded that they have little to lose by offering General Secretary Gorbachev some inducements, calculating that at a minimum this gives them more leverage with the United States. They probably are also convinced that they can control the

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[redacted]

pace of any improvements in Sino-Soviet relations to avoid endangering their expanding ties with the West. The Chinese, in our view, do not appear to have a clearly thought out strategy, however, and could end up moving further toward accommodating Moscow than they now envision--especially if Gorbachev responds with some new, more imaginative initiatives of his own. [redacted]

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The Soviets, for their part, are undoubtedly pleased by the recent progress in relations but realize they may still have lost some ground in the triangular relationship. Apprehensive about Sino-US ties, particularly in the military sphere, Moscow seems to be trying to develop a "China card" of its own in the hope of driving a wedge between Beijing and Washington. The Soviets, while apparently encouraging an improvement in Sino-Mongolian relations, have yet to offer China any security concessions. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether Gorbachev will give relations with China a higher priority [redacted] and reassess the old policy of encirclement and military intimidation. If he does, we could eventually see the Soviets float some new initiatives on troop deployments along China's northern perimeter or on the Sino-Soviet disputed border. [redacted]

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Beijing's Game

Creeping Normalization

The Chinese continue to insist that they will not "normalize" political relations with Moscow until the Soviets accommodate China on at least one of the so-called "three obstacles": agreeing to withdraw from Afghanistan, stopping support to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, or reducing Soviet forces deployed against China. Yet they have steadily doled out small, symbolically important helpings of normalization over the past year without any Soviet quid pro quo. [redacted]

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Since last winter, for example, Beijing has begun once more to refer to Soviet leaders as "comrade" and the Soviet Union as "socialist," terms not used since the mid-1960s. More recently, the Chinese have reestablished parliamentary relations and agreed to resume trade union ties, and exchange foreign minister visits sometime next year. Chinese leaders also made a not so subtle display of their "independence" on the eve of the Geneva summit by receiving the Soviet American specialist Arbatov and a delegation of the Supreme Soviet at the same time they hosted Vice President Bush. [redacted]

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The Chinese continue to insist they are not prepared to resume formal party-to-party ties. But we believe that if asked, they might be tempted to send an observer to the next Soviet party congress, scheduled for next February, although they probably would carefully weigh the US reaction first. A Chinese Foreign Ministry

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[redacted]

spokesman coyly turned aside a journalist's question recently on this subject by saying only that China had not been invited. [redacted]

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Room to Maneuver

In pursuing this more conciliatory tack, the Chinese have not abandoned their view of the Soviet Union as the main threat to their security and geopolitical interests. Rather, we believe they see increasing opportunities for China to maneuver between the superpowers--if only on the margin. This confidence may be based on several assumptions:

- That neither the current US-USSR rivalry nor the balance of strategic forces will change significantly over the rest of this decade, thus Beijing need not fear superpower collusion against its interests. The outcome of the Geneva summit probably has not altered the Chinese view, although they clearly will be watching the evolution of US-USSR relations closely over the coming months for some signs of change.
- Having placed their relations with the United States on a firmer footing over the past two years, China is in a stronger position to move forward with Moscow without appearing to do so out of weakness.
- Finally, a younger more reform oriented Soviet leadership may in time be willing to reassess its policy toward China, thus it is in China's interest to offer Gorbachev some inducements. [redacted]

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Whether Deng Xiaoping shares these assumptions is unclear. Earlier this year he was under pressure from some of his Politburo critics--Chen Yun and Peng Zhen--to expand economic and political contacts with Moscow at a faster pace, according to US Embassy reporting and our media analysis. Since Deng was unable to shunt them aside at the recent party congress, we suspect that they and perhaps some within Deng's own reform wing of the party, are continuing to press for the adoption of a more flexible strategy in dealing with Moscow and Washington. [redacted]

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Prospective Gains and Potential Danger

Beijing, for its part, is likely to continue gradually to expand economic and political contacts with Moscow, leaving the way open for Gorbachev to respond more positively to China's security concerns. It may even be preparing to make a more intense effort to probe the limits of Soviet flexibility. The Chinese probably believe that at minimum improving relations serves their modernization program by keeping tensions manageable. They also regard the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc states as potential markets for goods, such as textiles, that they are having a harder time selling in the West and as sources for some technology they need, such as in the field of hydroelectric power. [redacted]

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By being patient and flexible toward Moscow, Chinese leaders probably also believe they stand to gain at least some leverage with the United States on issues like Taiwan and technology transfer--certainly more than they would if they allowed Sino-Soviet relations to remain static or to deteriorate. They probably recognized, however, that if they pursue this tack too far they run the risk of not only encouraging Moscow to stand pat on security issues, but of weakening the strategic underpinnings of their expanding ties with Washington. [redacted]

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Beijing probably believes that it can continue to control the pace and scope of improvements in ties with Moscow to avoid alarming the West, whose reaction the Chinese carefully monitor. Indeed, Chinese almost certainly will continue to invoke the three obstacles partly to reassure Washington and to frustrate attempts by Moscow to exploit improved relations to its own advantage within the triangle. We also expect Beijing to continue its support for the Afghan and Cambodia insurgents. [redacted]

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Although the three obstacles no longer appear to be the impediment they once were to "normalizing" Sino-Soviet relations, we believe Sino-Soviet strategic differences will continue to set limits on how far Beijing is prepared to go in improving ties with Moscow--especially as long as China also wants access to Western technology for its modernization drive. But Beijing's new approach to triangular politics runs large potential risks. If Gorbachev decides to respond in some new, more imaginative way, than has been past Soviet practice, this could reopen last spring's debate among Chinese leaders over relations with Moscow and push Deng to move further toward accommodating Moscow than he now envisions.¹ [redacted]

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Moscow's Game

The View from the Kremlin

The Soviets have reason to be pleased with the recent progress in Sino-Soviet relations, especially because it has cost Moscow little. But they also recognize that they have not been able to deter China from developing closer ties with the United States, especially in the military sphere, and that they could actually lose some ground in the strategic triangle. Moreover, we believe Moscow must worry that Washington will try to solidify its relations with Beijing rather than be more forthcoming with Moscow in response to any improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. [redacted]

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Apprehensive about Sino-US ties, the Soviets have sought recently to develop some kind of "China card" of their own. To that end they have expanded the dialogue with the Chinese by adding more topics to the agenda of their periodic consultations. The Soviet have, for example:

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- Sent a delegation of foreign ministry officials to Beijing for a week of consultations on disarmament issues in August.
- Persuaded the Chinese to discuss disarmament issues, space weapons and security in the Asia/Pacific region, as well as Afghanistan, Cambodia and various "bilateral" issues, at their seventh round of consultations at the deputy foreign minister level, held in Beijing this October. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets also have pushed for more exchanges like Georgy Arbatov's recent visit, which reportedly prompted a Chinese proposal for a Sino-Soviet seminar on international issues in 1986, as well as an agreement to exchange more scholars interested in international relations and the foreign policies of the two countries:

- Mikhail Titarenko, the new Director of the USSR's Institute of the Far East, visited China in late October-early November for talks with Chinese academics on party matters and domestic reforms.
- Chinese First Deputy Premier Song Ping stopped off in Moscow in late November, enroute home from visits to Bulgaria and Poland, for talks and dinner with Soviet First Deputy Premier Talyzin, Chairman of the USSR's State Planning Committee. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets are striving not to reawaken Chinese fears of superpower collusion. Instead, Arbatov reportedly was rather candid with the Chinese about the unlikelihood of a breakthrough in US-Soviet ties anytime soon. The Soviets could adopt a different tack in the aftermath of the Geneva summit, but we believe they probably will continue to put more emphasis on the importance of "socialist unity," and especially China's obligation to stop blaming the superpowers equally for world tensions and to join forces with the USSR and its allies against the "imperialist" camp. [REDACTED]

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To further their efforts to develop a China card, the Soviets also have soft-pedalled their reservations about Chinese economic reforms and acknowledged China as "socialist." In doing so, they probably hope to encourage the United States and its allies to question the wisdom of helping China to modernize its economy and armed forces. We also believe they do not want to appear to be interfering in China's internal politics, lest they undermine those in the Chinese leadership who are both critical of the reforms and in favor of closer Sino-Soviet relations. [REDACTED]

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No Give on Obstacles

The Soviets continue to refuse to make concessions on the three obstacles and privately insist that these are artificial barriers Beijing uses to slow the improvement in relations with Moscow and thus to protect its ties with Washington. They predict the Chinese will eventually abandon such devices and hence imply that Moscow need not give any ground. Meanwhile, the Soviets continue to criticize [redacted]

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[redacted] China's support for the resistance movements in Afghanistan and Cambodia and its opposition to the USSR on other Asian issues. [redacted]

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At the same time, the Soviets are encouraging the new Mongolian leadership under Jambyn Batmonh to improve relations with China. Batmonh noted during his visit to Moscow in August that the Mongolians were "paying close attention to the process of normalizing Sino-Soviet relations." Since then, Sino-Mongolian contacts have developed along lines similar to Sino-Soviet relations over the past few years. In encouraging Mongolia to follow its lead, we suspect Moscow may hope somehow to persuade Beijing over time to agree to some sort of an accommodation on the Mongolian question--possibly involving a compromise regarding Soviet forces now stationed in Mongolia. [redacted]

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How Flexible

For the Soviets' part, it remains to be seen whether Gorbachev will give China a higher priority and devise a more flexible strategy for dealing with the security issues that divide them. A number of Soviet officials have interpreted the replacement of Gromyko, whose focus was the United States and Europe, with Shevardnadze as a sign that Gorbachev intends to play a more active role in Asia. [redacted]

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We believe, however, that several factors will continue to inhibit Soviet flexibility. The Soviets expect China to remain an adversary for many years even if they manage somehow to deal with one or more of the "obstacles." The two countries have competing ambitions in Asia and other parts of the world--a situation the Soviets believe is unlikely to change for the better any time soon. Some Soviets, moreover, believe that recent Chinese gestures confirm the correctness of Moscow's current policy of toughness. Then too, Gorbachev probably must proceed cautiously because of the suspicions of China among the Soviet elite and possible opposition among key interest groups, such as the party bureaucracy, military establishment and security services, to offering security concessions to Beijing [redacted]

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The Soviets also [redacted] expect that China, although hardly a threat at the moment, will grow stronger and pose a more substantial

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security threat in another decade or two. The Soviet's practice has been to keep the Chinese hemmed in until Beijing demonstrates a genuine interest in improving relations--not just a desire to buy time to modernize its armed forces. Soviet policy toward North Korea, India, and Vietnam suggest this remains the basic thrust of their policy. [redacted]

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There is no direct evidence that the Soviets are considering major concessions. Indeed, most Soviet officials seem to believe in "hanging tough" with the Chinese and not offering them any concessions. But they could recognize Beijing's claims to almost all of the 700 disputed islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers, most of which have little importance in either economic or military terms, while offering China compensation for the strategically important Heixilazi Island, opposite Khabarovsk. The Soviets also could make some token force reductions opposite China, by withdrawing one or more of their ready ground force divisions from the area or thinning out various Soviet units there. Then, too, the Soviets could withdraw one or more of the five divisions they now have in Mongolia without seriously eroding their overall security situation or calling into question their support for Ulaanbaatar. [redacted]

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None of these options appears very likely at the moment, but Gorbachev and his colleagues may at some point decide that a decision to accommodate Beijing on some of its security concerns is worth the risk, because:

- Sino-Soviet relations still lag far behind China's ties with the West, and Moscow could lose additional ground by standing still while Washington and Beijing are moving closer.
- An improvement in Sino-Soviet ties would weaken the US position, demonstrate that the drift in Soviet policy is over, and show that Gorbachev is in charge.
- Moscow also might see a unique opportunity to influence Chinese domestic politics, by bolstering any elements favoring a more rapid improvement in Sino-Soviet relations, or a more restrained dialogue with the United States [redacted]

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We cannot rule out the possibility that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa discussed such moves with the Chinese during his week long visit to Beijing in early December, at which time the two sides agreed on an exchange of foreign minister visits in 1986, beginning with a visit to Moscow by Chinese Foreign Minister Wu late next spring.

[redacted]

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Annex
Sino-Soviet Relations
A Chronology

21 December 1984

First Deputy Premier Arkhipov arrives on a highly publicized trip to Beijing. Three agreements signed, calling for bilateral economic and technical cooperation; bilateral scientific and technical cooperation; and the establishment of a commission on economic, trade, and scientific and technical cooperation.

28 December 1984

Bilateral agreement to increase the volume of trade from approximately US \$1.3 billion to \$1.7 billion in 1985.

15 January 1985

Chinese Ambassador to Burma, after only one month in the country, hosts a private dinner for the highranking officers of the Soviet Embassy; the Ambassador claims the dinner was possible because of improving relations between the two countries.

3-14 March 1985

Chinese National People's Congress delegation visits Moscow, the first parliamentary exchange in two decades.

10 March 1985

Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko dies, Mikhail Gorbachev is named his successor.

11 March 1985

Gorbachev states in his acceptance speech that the Soviet desire a serious improvement in relations with China, given reciprocity in the talks.

12 March 1985

While signing condolences book at Soviet Embassy, NPC Standing Committee Chairman Peng Zhen congratulates Gorbachev, calling him "comrade."

14 March 1985

Vice Premier Li Peng, head of the delegation to Chernenko's funeral, meets Gorbachev, the highest ranking meeting between the two countries in 20 years. Li conveys General Secretary Hu Yaobang's congratulatory message and calls the Soviet Union a "socialist" country. Li states China's hopes for an improvement in "political relations."

21 March 1985

High-level economic delegation led by State Economic Commission Vice Minister Zhao Weichang meets with Arkhipov to discuss bilateral transportation issues.

26 March 1985

Chinese invite officials from Moscow's Institute of the Far East, once renowned as a hotbed of anti-Chinese propaganda, to a reception in Moscow.

30 March 1985

Soviets brief the Chinese on Schultz-Gromyko Meetings in Geneva; Soviets state hopes for reciprocity in these talks.

4 April 1985

Soviet friendship delegation arrives in China and on 5 April signs plan for 1985 program.

5 April 1985

Bilateral protocol signed in Beijing calling for the exchange of 200 students and trainees during the 1985/86 academic year.

9 April 1985

Sixth Round of Sino-Soviet Talks convenes in Moscow.

22 April 1985

Sixth Round of Sino-Soviet Talks concludes in Moscow. TASS carries a joint statement identifying among other areas "political relations" as an issue for improvement.

23 April 1985

Wang Jiachong, Vice President of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, announces that China may restore relations with trade unions in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These relations have been suspended since 1967.

23 April 1985

In a speech celebrating Lenin's 115th birthday, Geydar Aliyev, First Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, states that the Soviet Union is striving seriously for an improvement of relations with China based on reciprocity.

4 June 1985

Protocol signed for a short-term exchange of TASS and Xinhua staff members.

13 June 1985

Talks on consular affairs end in Beijing with two sides reportedly agreeing to simplify visa procedures and to reopen consulates in Shanghai and Leningrad.

26 June 1985

Gorbachev speech in Dnepropetrovsk notes that the USSR intends to make active effort to overcome the "negative patch" in Sino-Soviet relations.

1 July 1985

Gromyko replaced as Foreign Minister by Shevardnadze--a development that several Soviet officials have portrayed as a sign Gorbachev wants a new Asian policy.

16 July 1985

Chinese Vice Premier Yao Yilin concludes week-long visit to USSR, during which two sides concluded agreements on bilateral trade during 1986-90 and economic cooperation. Yao Yilin was received by Premier Tikhonov on 11 July, but Gorbachev was unavailable, having gone to Minsk for a conference with Soviet military leaders.

8 August 1985

Soviet trade union delegation arrives in China for week-long visit, first in 20 years. Returns home on 16 August.

9 August 1985

Soviet Foreign Ministry officials arrive in Beijing for a week of consultations on disarmament issues. Returns to USSR on 16 August.

29 August 1985

Mongolian leader Batmonh, at dinner hosted by Gorbachev, notes that Mongolians have been paying close attention to process of normalizing Sino-Soviet relations--hinting at Mongolian intent to respond more positively to recent Chinese gestures aimed at improving Sino-Mongolian ties.

3 September 1985

Politburo member Aliyev attends reception at the Chinese Embassy in Moscow marking 40th anniversary of victory over Japan, first Politburo member to attend such an event in many years.

26 September 1985

Foreign Ministers Shevardnadze and Wu meet at UNGA, brief each other on party developments and agree to exchange visits in 1986.

2-20 October 1985

Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Il'ichev in Beijing for seventh round of bilateral consultations. Talks took place during October 4-18.

10-18 October 1985

Soviet Parliamentary delegation headed by Lev Tolkunov, chairman of Soviet of the Union, visits China, first Soviet delegation in 20 years. Tolkunov group received by CCP Politburo members Li Xiannian and Peng Zhen, whereas Plitburo candidate member Kuznetsov had been the top Soviet official to receive Chinese group in March.

10-25 October 1985

Georgiy Arbatov, Director of USA Institute, visits Beijing for talks with Chinese academics on world issues, Chinese economic reforms, and Soviet domestic developments, as well as Soviet views of Soviet-US relations and prospects for the Geneva meeting.

Late October-early November 1985

Mikhail Titatenko, Director of USSR's Institute of the Far East, visits China for talks with Chinese academics on party matters and domestic reforms.

11-25 November 1985

Second round of talks on consular matters held in Moscow. Two sides initial new accord and examine steps they might take to expand contacts in that area.

15 November 1985

Politburo members Peng Zhen and Li Peng visit Soviet exhibit at Asia-Pacific trade fair in Beijing.

25 November 1985

Chinese First Deputy Premier Song Ping stops off in Moscow, enroute home from visits to Bulgaria and Poland, for talks and dinner with Soviet First Deputy Premier Nikolay Talyzin, Chairman of USSR's State Planning Committee.

27 November 1985

Gorbachev, in address to USSR Supreme Soviet, welcomes the PRC's position in opposing the militarization of space and its statement of intent to refrain from first use of nuclear weapons--underscoring parallel interests on key arms control issues.

5 December 1985

Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa arrived in Beijing for discussions on Foreign Minister visits, the international situation, and--if the Chinese desire--the "military relationship" between the sides.

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